

# THE CRITIC.

---

BY GEOFFREY JUVENAL, ESQ.

No. VIII.

---

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 1820.

---

*"Ingenium cui sit, cui mens divinior, atque os  
"Magna sonaturum, des nominis hujus honorum."* HOR.

OF all the fraternities that have suffered from the intrusion of vain pretenders, no one has been more severely visited than the society of Men of Letters. Such numbers of pseudo-literati have arisen, of late years, that the reputation of the literary class—in itself the most honourable of all others—has been, in a great measure, undermined and destroyed. It becomes every man, who regards the welfare of Literature, and the honour of his Country, to exert himself to the utmost for the suppression of this evil;—for my own part, however little the feeble efforts of which I am capable may avail, I should deem it base to withhold them, in so just and so righteous a cause.

The first error (the prevalence of which has been a leading cause of the present state of our literature) consists in the taking for granted that every person, who chooses to publish a book, becomes entitled to consideration as a man of letters. How so mistaken an idea has happened to obtain, I cannot imagine; but it is certain that many silly people claim and receive the honours due to the cultivators of literature, who are distinguished from their fellow dunces, solely by the circumstance of having exposed their folly to the public eye and censure. A gentleman of this kind, having neither talents nor acquirements of any sort, to enable him to become respectable in any of the Professions, finds himself in danger of strutting his little hour in obscurity; and, as he possesses an inveterate desire of attracting attention, and had infinitely rather be despised than unnoticed, (such is his pitiful ambition—and how debased must be the soul, whose very ambition has no touch of nobleness!) he courageously determines to become at least notorious.—Fraught with this heroic resolution, he looks round for the means of carrying it into effect, and (if he be but blest with a due stock of impudence, the requisite knowledge of spelling, and a smattering of grammar) he speedily emerges in the character of a writer of History—or of Biography—or of Original Poems—or the editor of a Native Magazine,—just

as it may happen. The fools, who form a majority in every community, are delighted with the spirit, congenial to their own, which prevails throughout every page of his production; they trumpet forth the praises of the work, and of its author;—the mania spreads imperceptibly; and, in the course of a few years, this very man—so destitute of natural abilities—so utterly devoid of acquirements—is reputed successively—a Man of Promise—of Talents—of Genius—of Letters!

It is this popular idiocy that has humbled our national character; and the first step towards the redemption of our country from her actual degradation, should be to attack these impostors, and strip them of their unmerited honours. I am aware that some men, from whom better things might have been expected, have contributed not a little towards spreading this evil, under the mistaken idea that a literary spirit should be encouraged, in however ugly a shape it may make its appearance; and that these little half-formed literary cubs, may in time be licked to a nobler and more graceful stature. Just as if a man should catch a young idiot, and found his expectations of so educating the brat, as to make him an eminent orator, upon the circumstance of his being more noisy than most of his companions. For, an itch for scribbling is no more the mark of a literary, than an itch for babbling is of an eloquent, man:—the faculties

indeed of writing and speaking are necessary to the formation of the respective characters; but, it should be recollected, that they are merely mechanical faculties, which may be possessed in great perfection by a person having no pretensions to the more noble qualities of Literature and Eloquence. To foster a genuine literary spirit, it is indispensable that praise should be conferred on works of merit alone; to lavish it upon those of an opposite character, has a direct tendency to obstruct the growth of that spirit. The man who assists in giving a popularity—however ephemeral—to a bad book, depraves, as much as in him lies, the national taste, and thereby checks the improvement of the national literature.

But the evils which we suffer from the “*cacoëthes scribendi*,” are trivial when compared with the flood of oral folly that overwhelms us. Montaigne has aptly likened the Pedants of his day, to the birds, who pillage the corn-fields, and carry their spoil, untasted, for the benefit of their young ones.\* The race is by no means extinct, at the present hour,

---

\* “*Tout ainsi que les oiseaux vont quelquefois à la quête du grain, et le portent au bec sans le taster, pour en faire bechée à leurs petits: ainsi nos pedants vont pillotans la science dans les livres, et ne la logent q’au bout de leurs levres, pour la dégorger seulement, et mettre au vent.*”—*Essais de Montaigne*.

and it must be confessed that it is one of the most contemptible families of the human kind. We may pity an utterly ignorant person, for having been deprived by his destiny of opportunities for improvement; but, when we see a man—ever busy in filling the cup, as it were, from the rich fountains of literature—without imbibing one drop of the delicious contents—without being even exalted in spirit by the inspiring fumes that arise from it,—the best we can say of him is, that he might have made a very honest tapster, but must be despicable in any more honourable employment.

Low as such a man is, there is a class still lower. I allude to those persons who dip into the muddy waters of the literature of the day alone, and not possessing sufficient intellect even to steal from the deeper and purer springs, are content that the shallow stream of their conversation should be supplied from more accessible, though less clear, fountains. These gentlemen profess a particular intimacy with magazines, reviews, novels, and new poems; they will discourse with great fluency upon “the keen sarcasm of the Edinburgh”—“the powerful invective of the Quarterly”—and the respective excellencies of the *Analectic* and *Port Folio*. If poetry be mentioned, they will descant most profusely upon “the gloomy misanthropy of Byron”—“the terseness of Croaker”—“the vivacity

and sweetness of Moore"—and "the chaste beauties of Paulding;"—illustrating their opinions by a host of quotations, and proving at the same time, that they have read the several works, and that they have no faculty of distinguishing the most excellent from the most absurd.

But there is a more degraded class than even this; and it is composed of unhappy creatures, who are ambitious solely of becoming like those whom I have just described, and are yet too clumsy to attain even the pitiful accomplishments to which they aspire. In vain do they toil—and fret—and wriggle;—an evil destiny lies upon all their exertions; and when, after hours of preparatory application, they begin to converse,—they can neither quote a single passage correctly, nor remember for their souls, from what author they have been so long and so fruitlessly endeavouring to get it by rote. They are blest with neither the powers of memory, nor the facility of utterance that distinguish their more fortunate brethren; but the deficiency of these gifts is supplied by the abundance of another quality—the never failing characteristic of their whole family—an unabashed impudence. Their other faculties being almost obliterated, the whole force of their souls is concentrated to strengthen this one ruling principle; and with what complete



success it is difficult to conceive. Borne up by this, they boldly break into every literary discussion; floundering blindly on from blunder to blunder;—misquoting, miscalling, misdating—and mistaking one thing for another;—to the great annoyance of some,—the amusement of a few—the admiration of their numerous brethren—and the manifest exposure of their own ignorance and folly.

I would not vituperate my country, and what I have said above, must be understood as applying to a part only of our society. We possess some good books, and there are among us many genuine Men of Letters. But I do say that the popular taste is vitiated, and is daily becoming more and more corrupt. We had a *Dennie* and a *Clifton*; yet the classical elegance of the one has not availed to preserve his countrymen from being intoxicated by the quaintness and affectation of the *Salmagundi* school,—and the purity and wit of the other have as little proved powerful to save his work from being deserted for the bathos and silliness of the *Backwoodsman*. I remember them both;—in private life they united qualities which are seldom found together, brilliancy of conversation, and modesty of deportment; in their writings, they were chaste without being tame, and elevated without being extravagant—alas! I little thought to have lived until their light should be hidden by a cloud

of delirious bats, who had left their native obscurity, and "madly rushed to uncongenial day,"—vermin which are likely to be of direful omen to our country, unless the land be speedily cleansed of them.

R.